
a *Grace Notes* course

The Acts of the Apostles

an expositional study

by Warren Doud

Lesson 213: **Acts 12:12-25**

ACTS, Lesson 213, Acts 12:12-25

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Acts 12:12-25**Acts 12:12**

And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying.

and when he had considered the thing

NAS: when he realized this

NIV: when this had dawned on him

from a verb meaning “to perceive; to become aware of”. Peter’s mind was now working overtime and he took in his situation clearly. He decided what to do

the house of Mary the mother of John ... Mark

It’s hard to keep track of all the women named Mary in the New Testament. There were (1) Mary the mother of Jesus; (2) Mary of Bethany; (3) Mary Magdalene; (4) Mary the wife of Cleopas; Mary the mother of James and Joses; and now (5) Mary the mother of John Mark. This woman was Barnabas’s sister!, from Col. 4:10.

Col. 4:10, “Aristarchus my fellow prisoner salutes you, and Marcus, sister's son to Barnabas .. **ahnyio~ Barnaba**

The disciples probably met in Mary’s house regularly, which Peter knew; and he was evidently well acquainted with John Mark, whom he later calls his “son” (1 Peter 5:13). At any rate, Peter knew where to go, and even at this early hour of the morning he hoped to find some disciples.

(We will have more to say about John Mark when he is introduced a little later in Acts as the missionary colleague of Paul and Barnabas.)

where many were gathered together praying

No doubt fervent and desperate prayer was being made. Here were believers praying all

might for some help from God in these terrible times. All of the Christians were very fearful; how many more of them would be arrested and executed?

Remember from Acts 4:23 that the believers were gathered together praying for the apostles who were under the threats of the Sanhedrin. God had rescued Peter then; would He let him be put to death, as James had been?

Acts 12:13-14

And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda.

And when she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate.

knocked at the door

The door was a gateway or passageway leading into the house. The Greek word can refer to an outer court or to the door itself. The door would have been kept shut and locked; these were threatening times, and as we see from Acts 8:3, the Jews continued their pogrom against the Christians.

Acts 8:3, As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.

a damsel came

The NAS and NIV use “servant girl” (**paidiki~**). The word means “young girl”, but it was used for maidservants as well. Rhoda probably had the duty to open the door.

Deissman refers to an ostrakon (piece of broken pottery) which used this word to refer to a female slave.¹

The French word for young girl is *demoiselle*, so in polite conversation you would address an unmarried young lady as *mademoiselle*, which

¹ Deissman, *Light from the Ancient East*, p. 200

means “my young lady.” (cf also, *monsieur* my lord, *madame* – my lady). The older English word damsel comes from the French, so it is correct here, if old fashioned.

named Rhoda

Rhoda means “rose”. Jewish girls were given beautiful names, like Dorcas, or Tabitha (*gazelle*), Susanna (*lily*), Tamar (*palm tree*), or Esther, called Hadassah (*myrtle tree*). So in English we have Myrtle, Rose, Lily, Iris, and Dorcas and Tabitha (but not *gazelle*).

She knew Peter’s voice

Rhoda recognized Peter’s voice. Peter was a frequent visitor to this home, in fact it was very likely a teaching center (read “local church”) for that community. Rhoda, for fear of opening the door to a stranger, had probably asked him to identify himself. Peter was not only knocking, then, but calling out as well, in his anxiety to be admitted.

she opened not the gate for gladness

Gladness is **cara** – “joy”. Here is a “life-like picture of the maid who left Peter standing at the door”² And remember that Peter is in fear of his life, probably thinking that the soldiers are right behind him.

but ran in and told how Peter stood at the gate

The servant girl seems to be as well accepted in this household as any member of the family, the relationship of Christians with their servants or employees showed the greatest grace mental attitude. (cf. Titus 2).

Acts 12:15,16

12:15 And they said unto her, You are mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel.

² Robertson, Acts 12:13

12:16 But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished.

You are mad

NAS, NIV: “you are out of your mind”. They figured that Rhoda has lost her senses, at least momentarily.

Festus used the same words to Paul in:

Acts 26:24, “And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, you are beside yourself; much learning has made you mad.”

mainomai be mad, be out of one’s mind, be insane, opposite **σωφρονέω** (be of sound mind). Rhoda was obviously very excited, but the Christian’s in the house were unable to believe that she was being rational.

but she constantly affirmed that it was even so

Rhoda kept repeating to them that she had heard Peter at the door; nothing they said to her put her off it”³.

It is his angel

This was the next idea that entered their minds, that the person knocking was actually Peter’s guardian angel. They were so far from believing that Peter could have been released that they are thinking of the most farfetched alternatives!

Clarke:⁴ “It was a common opinion among the Jews that every man had a guardian angel (in the Catholic church it is an article of faith). They also believed that angels often assumed the likeness of people.”

Peter continued knocking

Peter was in danger, of being recaptured! He was beginning to be impatient. He kept up knocking at the locked door.

³ Gill, Acts 12:15

⁴ Clarke, Acts 12:15

Acts 12:17

But he, beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Go show these things unto James, and to the brethren. And he departed, and went into another place.

beckoning with the hand

This was a common signal in those days (as, indeed, in our own time), where the speaker indicates by a downward movement of the hand that he wants people to be quiet and listen. Peter was anxious for every precaution to be taken, and he had very urgent directions for the brethren. As we see, he spent little time at Mary's house. He gave his instructions and immediately departed.

James and the brethren

"James (the Lord's brother) and the brethren" were not at this meeting, then, at Mary's house; they were probably gathered at another house. There was no large building in Jerusalem where all the believers could meet. All church activities, planning sessions, daily gatherings for teaching and prayer, common meals, were conducted in people's homes, with those Christians of Mary's neighborhood meeting in her house.

By now James was the leading elder in Jerusalem, though there were a number of elders (Acts 11:30; 21:18). Paul calls him an apostle (Gal. 1:19), although he was not one of the original twelve. In Acts 15 we will see James presiding over the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:13).

See **Appendix A** on an extended discussion of James, the Lord's brother, by Paton C. Gloag.

went to another place

Probably Peter left the city.⁵ Matt. 10:23, "When they persecute you in one city, flee to another."

This would certainly have been prudent. He is back in Jerusalem a few years later, at the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15), which was after the death of Agrippa I.

The Catholics say that Peter went to Rome, to found the church there, but there is no scriptural support for this. Clarke says, "Those who can believe anything may believe this."

If he left Jerusalem it's more likely that he went to Antioch; but from the phrase we read in this verse, we can't really conclude that he left Jerusalem at all. In fact one or more Greek versions read "he went to another *house*."

Luke does not follow the ministry of Peter after this in any detail, as he does the work of Paul. We have to glean Peter's future history from brief mentions in Acts and from some inferences we might gain from Peter's own epistles.

Acts 12:18

Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter.

the soldiers

We will have more to say about the organization of the Roman troops in Jerusalem and Judea when we study later chapters, such as Acts 22 to 24, where we are introduced to Claudius Lysias, the commander of the Augustan cohort.

Within the walls of the Fortress of Antonia⁶ there were barracks for at least a thousand soldiers.

⁵ Robertson, Acts 12:17

⁶ from *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, Conybeare and Howson, chapter 21. "If we were to recount the earlier history of the Temple, we might perhaps identify

the tower of Antonia with the palace of which we read in the book of Nehemiah (2:8; 7:2). It was certainly the building which the Hasmonean princes erected for their own residence under the name of Baris.

Afterwards rebuilt with greater strength and splendour by the first Herod, it was named by him in honour of Mark Antony. Its situation is most distinctly marked out by Josephus, who tells us that it was at the northwestern corner of the Temple area, with the cloisters of which it communicated by means of staircases (Acts 21:35, 40).

It is difficult, however, to define the exact extent of ground which it covered in its renewed form during the time of the Herods. There is good reason for believing that it extended along the whole northern side of the great Temple court, from the northwestern corner where it abutted on the city, to the north eastern where it was suddenly stopped by the precipice which fronted the valley: and that the tank, which is now popularly called the Pool of Bethesda, was part of the fosse which protected it on the north. Though the ground on which the tower of Antonia stood was lower than that of the Temple itself, yet it was raised to such a height, that at least the south eastern of its four turrets commanded a view of all that went on within the Temple, and thus both in position and in elevation it was in ancient Jerusalem what the Turkish governor's house is now, whence the best view is obtained over the enclosure of the mosque of Omar.

A striking illustration of the connection between the Fortress and the Temple is afforded by the history of the quarrels which arose in reference to the priestly vestments. These robes were kept in Antonia during the time of Herod the Great. When he died, they came under the superintendence of the Roman Procurator. Herod Agrippa I during his short reign, exercised the right which had belonged to his grandfather. At his death the command that the Procurator Cuspius Fadus should take the vestments under his care raised a ferment among the whole Jewish people; and they were only kept from an outbreak by the presence of an overwhelming force under Longinus, the Governor of Syria. An embassy to Rome, with the aid of the younger Agrippa (Herod Agrippa II), who was then at the imperial court, obtained the desired relaxation: and the letter is still extant in which Claudius assigned to Herod, King of Chalcis, the privilege which had belonged to his brother. But under the succeeding Procurators, the relation between the fortress Antonia and the religious ceremonies in the Temple became more significant and ominous."

The whole garrison in Jerusalem was not always posted there. It is probable that the usual quarters of the "whole cohort" (Matt. 27:27), or the greater part of it, were towards the western quarter of the city, in the Praetorium (John 18:28) or official residence where Jesus was mocked by the soldiers, and on the pavement in front of which Pilate sat, and condemned the Lord Jesus Christ.

But at the time of the greater festivals, when a vast crowd of people, full of religious fanaticism and embittered by hatred of their Roman rulers, flocked into the Temple courts, it was found necessary to order a strong military force into Antonia, and to keep them under arms, so that they might act immediately and promptly in the case of any outbreak. Since Peter was being held in prison during the time of Passover, a maximum number of troops would have been immediately available.

The Roman Army was at the peak of its strength and discipline at this time, and soldiers stationed in an important city like Jerusalem were elite forces.

TOPIC: ROMAN ARMY SOLDIER TRAINING

Acts 12:19

And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers, and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judaea to Caesarea, and there abode.

he examined the keepers

Herod had all available forces out, looking for Peter. The search may have taken several days, as it would have been very thorough. When Peter was not found, Herod had a formal inquiry conducted into the whole matter of Peter's escape.

and commanded that they should be put to death

"They should be put to death" is the aorist passive infinitive of **apagw** which really means only "to lead away". In itself, this word does not

have the connotation of execution or death. The word is used in context with other words to refer to leading someone away to execution; but alone it does not carry that meaning.

Robertson says that **apagw** means “led away to execution, as in Matt. 27:31”.

And after that they had mocked him, they took the robe off from him, and put his own raiment on him, and led him away to crucify him.”

But the Greek there is “**kai aphiagon auton eij to staurwsai... .**” translated. It’s the word “crucify” that indicates the execution concept, not the words “to lead away.”

My conclusion is, after tracing the use of this particular verb through many resources of Greek language study, that it we don’t have to assume that the sixteen soldiers assigned to guard Peter were executed. They could have been given some other punishment; and there were many types of discipline in the Roman army that could have been used.

Punishments in the Roman army included:

1. Corporal punishment (*castigatio*),
2. monetary fine, (*pecunaria multa*),
3. added duty (*munerum indictio*),
4. relegation to an inferior service (*militiae mutatio*),
5. reduction in rank (*gradus deiectio*) or
6. dishonorable discharge from service (*missio ignominiosa*).

These are all equal enough to any punishment in a modern army and self-explanatory in the cause and effects both on the individual and overall moral and discipline of the ranks.

Execution: The death penalty was rarely used and as a deterrent against desertion, mutiny or insubordination. In cases where execution might be considered, factors such as the soldier's length of service, his rank, previous conduct, soldier's age, etc. were taken into

account. Special consideration was also given to young soldiers.

Decimation: An extremely rare style of the execution penalty was called decimation and would only be used in extreme cases of cowardice or mutiny. Every tenth man of a centuria, cohort or even the entire Legion, randomly chosen by a draw of lots, was killed by being clubbed or stoned to death by the other members of his unit. The effect could be overwhelmingly positive or an absolute disaster.

Disbandment: An entire legion could be disbanded without the customary land settlements and pension disbursements. This like the others was rarely done and was more likely as a deterrent to Legions who may be loyal to a political opponent or group.

For example, the legion I Macriana Liberatrix (“Macer's Liberators”), was formed by Lucius Claudius Macer, rebellious Governor of Africa, in 68 AD, to be used against Nero. In the midst of this year, that came to be known as the Year of the Four Emperors, Galba was one of the men who took claim to the throne. Galba distrusted Macer and ordered the death of the Legion I commanding officers and the disbandment of the questionably formed Legion. It was removed from service to the empire without ever seeing action.

he went from Judea to Caesarea

There were some special events and games in honor of the emperor Claudius, so that’s probably why he went to the coast.

Acts 12:20

And Herod was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon: but they came with one accord to him, and, having made Blastus the king's chamberlain their friend, desired peace; because their country was nourished by the king's country.

Herod was highly displeased

NAS: "he was very angry"

NIV: "he had been quarreling with the people ..."

This is a word **quomaeuw** originally meant "to fight desperately" or "to be enraged" or "to have a hot quarrel". There is no history record of a real war between Herod and the Phoenicians. Tyre and Sidon were Roman, but Herod did not have any authority there; Phoenicia belonged to Syria, so he would have had to deal with them diplomatically.

with them of Tyre and Sidon

Whatever it was that Herod was angry about, his response would likely have been to put some kind of economic restrictions or sanctions in place, such as preventing these coastal cities from receiving supplies from Judea, or closing his own ports to their ships. Caesarea was a rival of Tyre and Sidon.

Also, some years before this, there was a nasty dispute between the Sidonians and the citizens of Damascus about the limits of their respective territories. Herod was bribed by the leaders in Damascus to use his influence in their favor with Flaccus, the governor of Syria⁷, so it's not unlikely that this was still a contentious issue between Herod and the Phoenicians.

they came with one accord to him

The ambassadors of both cities got together and approached Herod about a reconciliation.

having made Blastus, the king's chamberlain, their friend

"Chamberlain" is **ton epi tou koitwno~ tou basilew~** which means "the one in charge of the bed chamber." Latin: *cubicularius; praefectus cubiculi*. [ruler of the cubicle. ☺]
The chamberlain was usually the highest ranking servant of the monarch; he was the

chief steward of the ruler. The emperor Commodus relied entirely on his chamberlain for governing the empire; so did some of the other emperors.

Blastus is a Roman name; he was probably retained by Herod when he was in Rome and had been with him ever since.

Blastus was undoubtedly persuaded by bribes to intercede with Herod. This was a common way to accomplish things with people in authority; e.g. Felix wanted a bribe to release Paul, and when he didn't get it, he kept him in custody.

Acts 24:25,26, "And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee. He hoped also that money should have been given him of Paul, that he might loose him: wherefore he sent for him the oftener, and communed with him.'

because their country was nourished by the king's country

A reference to commercial interests. This could be a direct reference to food products, because Tyre and Sidon, as large commercial cities on the coast, received large supplies of grain, fruit, and vegetables from Palestine. If Herod had cut off the supply to them, that surely would have caused great concern.

Acts 12:21-23

And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man. And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost.

Herod, arrayed in royal apparel...

There is a full account of Herod's illness and death in Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.6 and 19.8.

⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.6.3

The **set day** was the second day of celebration in Caesarea in honor of Claudius Caesar.

“Now, when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Caesarea, which was formerly called Strato’s Tower; and there he exhibited shows in honor of Caesar, upon his being informed that there was a certain festival celebrated to make vows for his safety. A great multitude was gotten together of the principal persons, and such as were of dignity through his province.

“On the second day of these shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a texture truly wonderful, and came into the theatre early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun’s rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a fascination over those that looked intently upon him; and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another (though not for his good), that he was a god; and they added, “Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature.”

The people were saying the Herod looked like a god and spoke like on; this was obsequious flattery. It was undoubtedly only the Gentiles who were calling Herod a god, for the Jews were not likely to have done so.

the angel of the Lord smote him

Curiously, this is the same word for “smote” that was used in verse 7 for the angel smiting Peter on the side. Herod was struck with a severe affliction, at the age of fifty-four and at the very peak of his influence and power.

“Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. But, as he presently afterwards looked up, he saw an owl sitting on a certain rope over his head, and immediately understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings, as it had once been the messenger of good tidings to him; and fell into

the deepest sorrow. A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner.”⁸

he was eaten of worms he gave up the ghost (died)

This is not an uncommon descriptions of some forms of disease in ancient times. Herodotus described the Queen of Cyrene as having worms which ate her flesh while she was still alive. This could also refer to some form of cancer, which in those days might have been mistaken for worms.

“And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age, and in the seventh year of his reign; for he reigned four years under Caius Caesar, three of them were over Philip’s tetrarchy only, and on the fourth he had that of Herod added to it; and he reigned besides those, three years under the reign of Claudius Caesar: in which time he reigned over the aforementioned countries, and also had Judea added to them, as also Samaria and Caesarea. The revenues that he received out of them were very great, no less than twelve millions of drachmae. Yet did he borrow great sums from others; for he was so very liberal, that his expenses exceeded his incomes; and his generosity was boundless.”⁹

Acts 12:24,25

But the word of God grew and multiplied.

And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministry, and took with them John, whose surname was Mark.

The evangelists and Bible teachers were still hard at work, in spite of the dangers and hardships. The death of Herod may have brought some measure of relief. He had been a great threat to the Christians, and now the

⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 19.8

⁹ *ibid.*

persecution may have let up a little. Also, the turmoil surrounding the sudden death of the king, and all the activities associated with the transfer of power, may have taken some of the attention away from the disciples.

Roman Army, Soldier Training

From Vegetius, *Epitome of Military Science*, 23

Recruits and novice soldiers are trained morning and afternoon in types of arms; but veterans and trained soldiers also exercised with their arms once a day without fail. For length of service or number of years does not transmit the art of war, but continual exercise. No matter how many years he has served, an unexercised soldier is a raw recruit.

Special drill (*armatura*), [mock battles. wd] which is displayed on festival days in the Circus [Maximus] is learned not just by the soldiers under the drillmaster, but by all soldiers alike in daily practice. For speed is acquired by bodily exercise itself, and also the skill to strike the enemy while covering oneself, especially in close-quarter sword fighting. What is more, they learn how to keep ranks and follow their ensign through such complicated evolutions in the mock-battle itself. No deviation arises among trained men, however great the confusion of numbers.

It is also very useful for them to exercise with the [sword and striking post] because they learn to go for the flank, feet, or head with the point and with the edge. Let them grow used to executing jumps and blows at the same time, rushing at the shield with a leap and crouching down again, now eagerly darting forward with a bound, now giving ground, jumping back. Let them also practice hitting the same posts from a distance with javelins, to increase their skill at aiming and the strength of the right arm.

Archers and slingers put up bundles of brushwood or straw (*scopae*), for a target, removing themselves 600 feet from the target, to practice hitting it frequently with arrows, or stones aimed from a sling staff (*fustibalis*). This enabled them to do without nerves in battle

what they had always done in exercises on the training field.

They should also be accustomed to rotating the sling once only about the head, when the stone is discharged from it. All soldiers also practice throwing stones of one pound weight (about 11 ½ ounces) by hand alone. This is considered a readier method because it does not require a sling.

They are also made to throw javelins and lead-weighted darts in continual and perpetual exercises; so much so, that in winter-time they build riding-schools for the cavalry and a kind of drill hall for the infantry, roofed with tiles or shingles, or, failing these, thatched with reeds, sedge, or straw. In them the army was trained in arms under cover, when the weather was disturbed by wind or rain. But for the rest of the time, even in winter, so soon as snow and rain ceased, they are made to train on the exercise-field, so that no interruption to routine might weaken soldiers' minds and bodies.

It is advisable that they should very frequently be felling trees, carrying burdens, jumping ditches, swimming in the sea or rivers, marching at full step, or even running with their [weapons], with their packs on. The habit of daily labor may not then seem arduous in war. Whether they be legion or [auxiliary troops], let them be training constantly. As a well-drilled soldier looks forward to battle, so an untrained one fears it.

Finally, note that technical skill is more useful in battle than strength. If training in arms ceases, there is no difference between a soldier and a civilian.